

Aberystwyth University

American Theatre to Cinema: Stardom and spaces

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Sarah Thomas

The Fourth Forage: on Wednesday October 27th 2010, 5pm, Venue: Postgraduate Seminar Room.



Peter Lorre and Lotte Lenya.

Spring's Awakening

Berlin, 1929.

Starting point in trying to anchor looking at all the material...

Link to my own research – book on Peter Lorre.

German Theatre pamphlets of the 19th & 20th Century.

Delved in...

But too easy!

The second envelope I looked at: a Lotte Lenya memorial piece.

And there he was – a record of his performance in *Spring's Awakening*.

A photo I hadn't come across before.

But need to move beyond the mere photograph as record – and here's where Lorre falls as a subject. This wouldn't have got me too much further in my own work. It's primary value to me is aesthetic here – because the relationship with Lorre. German Theatre is so well documented elsewhere.

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New York Theatre Guild of 1928

So I changed tact. Concentrated on 3 boxes of American Theatre pamphlets.

And I found that one single item wasn't going to reveal itself as a major find.

Instead, it made central the narrativising of archive material and history was going to be how to make the best use of the resources available.

Because what it gives the film historian is glimpses into uncharted territory – that has too often been overlooked and dismissed because it doesn't immediately relate to the cinema.

But in my own line of research – a very important through line.

Because one of the continuities between film and theatre is the actors – and this is why the American box proved so interesting.

So in the New York Theatre Guild of 1928, I came across what I'm interested in – traces of supporting actors: those who become Hollywood's character actors. My research areas – wanting to investigate the processes of becoming a character actor.

A glut of them – Henry Travers, Judith Anderson, Gale Sondergaard, Claude Rains.

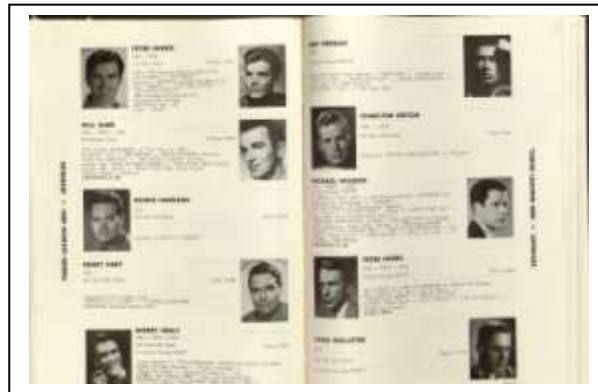
Anonymous, working performers – not cultural icons or representations via a strange star image of the character actor.

Processes, progressions, categorisations of the anonymous working actor.

Because, often within film archives and film studies – these figures become invisible. Present and valuable, but no one really knows what to do with them.

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This is clearly demonstrated in this Equity Guide of 1948 –

A life, career etc outside of the confines of “stardom”.

Piecemeal, but still invaluable.

Here – an anonymous page of male juvenile leads from 1948.

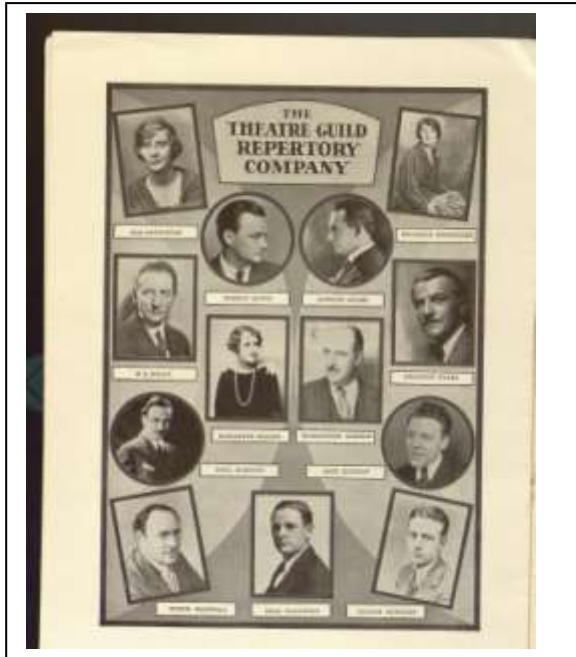
One of which is Charlton Heston. Very difficult to imagine him as a “juvenile” at all – too highly defined by his star image (the biblical hero).

These types of material reveal the limits of stardom as a means of analysing actors: who are working performers, working within a series of performative infrastructures – not just Hollywood cinema - before they become cultural symbols.

Something that analyses of film stars – and the concept of stardom itself – forgets all too often in its hurry to relate star persona, a representation of one self back to other public, mass modes of articulating a sense of oneself, the all-encompassing performance of everyday life and identity...

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Peggy Entwistle

The “Hollywood Sign Girl”

Returning to the Theatre Guild of 1928... This becomes crystal clear.

I turned the page from Claude Rains – here a top row actor, but not in Hollywood.

The third details of stock actors – a name caught my eye, if not the image.

Peggy Entwistle – I know that name...

Entwhistle – 1932 throws herself off the Hollywood sign. Becomes famous in death. Becomes a symbol of the dream of stardom. And of the fragile nature of Hollywood film stars. Only becoming notable through tragedy, death, decay etc – only through what they do off screen: not through their work.

The notion that to become unique – something central to film stardom / celebrity – to distinguish yourself from the immense labour pool in Hollywood – one way is to die tragically.

But here – Entwistle is not just a failed actress who dreamt of her name in light, but a working performer, one of a series of similar people: some of which become recognisable by name / work (Rains), some stay anonymous, none become ‘stars’ – apart from Entwistle.

But all are significant within the operation of Hollywood’s management of acting skill and labour.

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Annals from the American Historical Society

A different tact – not people but buildings.

A series of annals detailing the history of buildings. 'Annals from the American Historical Society'

Reminds that certainly in 'everytown' USA, theatres and cinemas were similar spaces.

The history of one is the history of another.

1. Sense of experience of watching a film – not just about production, but the lavishness of the picture palace. Comfort and opulence during the programme for the viewer. The totality of the experience.
2. The solid building and its role within the technology of the cinema. Theatre space as an experience, but also a technical site. Here, these detail the constructions and changes within American buildings and sites of exhibition (and their communities) – and in doing so also the history of cinema (and the Hollywood studios) as a medium too.
 1. Eg Centre Theatre in Denver, supposedly the first theatre built to house Cinemascope. Owned by Fox (hence the Cinemascope).